

Interview Transcript

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Interviewee: Sister Dennis Mary McFadden

Interviewer: Shannon Green, Director, CSJ Institute, Mount Saint Mary's University; Roman Zenz, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University; Mary Trunk, Instructor, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University

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[00:00:00.00] [Director's comments].

[00:00:06.06] DIRECTOR'S ASSISTANT: CSJ Oral History project, third interview, Sister Dennis Mary, January 21, 2020.

[00:00:24.29] SHANNON GREEN: So, if you would get us started, Sister Dennis Mary, would you state your full name and your age?

[00:00:31.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Sister Dennis Mary McFadden, and I'm 93.

[00:00:36.16] SHANNON GREEN: Would you start us off by telling us a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, a little bit about your family?

[00:00:44.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Okay. I was born in Oakland, California, and my the middle girl. I had an older sister and a younger sister. And I met the Sisters of St. Joseph [CSJs] at St. Jarlath Elementary school, where I went. And they had a ninth grade, so I went to the ninth grade there. And the Sisters were just great, I thought [laughs]. And so, when it came time to enter, I had had the Notre Dame Sisters in high school, and the Holy Name Sisters in college. But when it came time to enter, it was the St. Joseph's.

[00:01:30.06] SHANNON GREEN: Was your family very religious when you were growing up?

[00:01:33.29] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, both my parents are from Ireland. So, needless to say it was religious-oriented. So, it was--but they weren't the typical--the way they depict Irish immigrants. That wasn't true of my parents. I really didn't realize--well, I knew they were immigrants--but I didn't think of them in terms of how the--America portrays the Irish immigrant, you know, like the father being totally misunderstanding and beating up the kids and all of that. That wasn't true for me. My dad was just the opposite. As a matter of fact, when--we put on his tombstone "a gentle father". So, that it was--I had a happy childhood.

[00:02:32.21] SHANNON GREEN: What did your parents do for a living?

[00:02:35.10] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: My dad was a--my dad worked for Pacific Gas and Electric. And my mother got called back to work, because she was a--she became a citizen of the United States. And one of the things that they asked her was, would she support the government if--in time of war. And my mother said, "Yes." So, when we went to war, my mother was called back. And so what they did was, they assigned her to a cafeteria. And so, she went to work in the cafeteria during the war. And then, she liked it so much she just stayed on. She got to know the kids and you know--it broadened her--her life, you know.

[00:03:35.25] SHANNON GREEN: Since you had different Sisters in these different educational experiences, can you say what it was about the Sisters of St. Joseph that was more attractive to you?

[00:03:46.06] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, their relationship with one another. They were so friendly to one another that you knew they had a good relationship. And so, it was--that I didn't find among

the others. [laughs].

[00:04:06.09] SHANNON GREEN: When did you know--or when did you start thinking about becoming a Sister?

[00:04:11.24] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I really didn't want to become a Sister. [laughs]. That was the last thing in the world I wanted. And so, I went on to college. And so, finally I thought, "Well, I think I have a vocation and I don't want one. And so what I'll do is I'll join and they'll probably send me home in six months, and so I'll be okay." So, of course, the moment I entered I loved it. Then I--thought, "I hope they don't send me home." And so, been happy for seventy-two years.

[00:04:51.16] SHANNON GREEN: Would you say--was it was unusual that you went to college first, or that you went--a woman would have gone to college at all, or--how common was that?

[00:05:02.24] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh. I would have gone to college. I wanted to go to college. And I worked as a playground director at a local public school. And so, that gave me the money that I needed to pay for my tuition at Holy Names. So, that's--so, it wasn't probably unusual, because I really wanted to go to college. So, I knew I had to pay my own way to go, and so--.

[00:05:37.16] SHANNON GREEN: Did your parents encourage your education?

[00:05:39.11] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh yes. Well, they--felt the only way that you could really make it in America was to be educated. And so they encouraged it. And they encouraged my older sister, but she wasn't interested. [laughs]. My younger sister, yes, definitely.

[00:06:05.17] SHANNON GREEN: So, what did you--if you weren't going to be a Sister, what did you think you would do after college?

[00:06:11.26] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I didn't--I don't think I thought beyond that. You know, you just--I thought well I'd graduate and see if it helped. And in those days, it was pretty limited. There wasn't the choices that they have today. We could be a teacher or a nurse and that was about it.

[00:06:34.16] SHANNON GREEN: So, tell me a little bit more about the time that you entered. And was there a Sister who helped you with that process?

[00:06:42.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes, Sister Eloise Therese [Sister Eloise Therese Mescall (1919-2001)] from the Mount. And she had been at St. Jarlath when I was a student. And I became friendly with her then. And then, when it was time to enter I--you know, I guess by then she was at the Mount. And so, I got in touch with her. And so, she helped me enter.

[00:07:08.25] SHANNON GREEN: So, you said you loved it. Tell me what you loved about the religious life when you entered.

[00:07:15.22] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I really didn't know too much about it, to be honest. So, I just thought, well, I'll just go along with it whatever it is. And I remember the first night in the dining room--it was a whole refectory of Sisters. And I thought, "Well, if they can make it, I can make it."

[00:07:43.13] SHANNON GREEN: Were there--what was challenging about it for you?

[00:07:46.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Not knowing. You know, some knew a little bit more about it than I did. But I really didn't know. I didn't know what I was getting into. But, that was okay.

[00:08:06.20] SHANNON GREEN: And how did your parents feel about you entering?

[00:08:10.17] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, being Irish Catholic, they were sad to see me--but then they, themselves--they had left their home, never to go back. And so, at least they knew that they would be able to see me, so that made a difference. And, you know, the idea of religion was important to them.

[00:08:45.16] SHANNON GREEN: Were they able to come and visit you on Sundays?

[00:08:50.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: They--I was from Oakland, and the [unintelligible] was down here in LA. So, they did come to see me. And then of course when I got the habit, they came. And when I made vows, they came--first vows, then final vows. So, they--and then they visited me in between.

[00:09:15.28] SHANNON GREEN: What do you remember about any of your classmates, or the people you entered with? You would have been a little older, probably, than--

[00:09:27.01] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Right. But one of my classmates entered six months after me. She had gone to St. Jarlath too. And then so--but then we weren't in the same group.

[00:09:42.13] SHANNON GREEN: Did you make friends easily with your fellow Sisters?

[00:09:47.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: What?

[00:09:48.00] SHANNON GREEN: Did you make friends easily?

[00:09:50.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I thought so. Yeah.

[00:09:53.29] SHANNON GREEN: What do you remember about any of your vow ceremonies or receiving the habit? Can you share any stories?

[00:10:01.27] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I thought the six months was a long wait. So it seemed. But it was just--naturally it was something that we looked forward to. And just sort of fell in with the way things were going.

[00:10:23.00] SHANNON GREEN: Would you share what your baptismal name was?

[00:10:27.26] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: It was--I was named after my--the old Irish tradition--I was named after my mother's mother. And that was "Anna". But I never went by Anna. I was always "Nancy". And "Nancy" is really the Gaelic for Anne. And so that's all everybody knew me by, was Nancy.

[00:10:55.15] SHANNON GREEN: Do you remember receiving your religious name?

[00:10:58.27] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes, I got my father and my mother. I wanted "Dennis Ellen", but they gave me my father and my mother. And that was a name that was available. We got three choices. And of course, I didn't ask for Dennis Mary. That's the one I got. [laughs].

[00:11:28.01] SHANNON GREEN: Tell me about your first ministry.

[00:11:35.15] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: It was at St. John Chrysostom in Inglewood [California]. And I taught second grade. And of course, the whole thing was brand new to me. But it was--what Sister Georgina [??], who taught at St. John Evangelist--and she taught second grade. And so every Sunday she helped me plan the days. And so, it wasn't like I was just out on a string. I mean, she really helped me. She gave me all the seat work--because that was when we used to have the kids in groups. And so, she gave me the work that the kids did while I was working with the one group. And then, the principal got ill, and so the next thing I knew, I was in the eighth grade helping them out. But I enjoyed teaching from the first day until the last day.

[00:12:50.18] SHANNON GREEN: Wow. Not everyone can say that.

[00:12:51.18] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah, oh yeah. I loved teaching.

[00:12:55.28] SHANNON GREEN: Was there a grade or age group that you--

[00:12:59.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, grammar school--I loved the fifth grade. They were not old enough to be independent, and yet they were very, very much dependent.

[00:13:18.29] SHANNON GREEN: What was it like to--did you move around a lot in your early--in the earlier ministries, you would be two years, three years, four years--

[00:13:27.04] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. And that was--I think that was--that's how it was at the time. We were under final vows, and so they moved us so that we were not usually three years under the same place.

[00:13:49.01] SHANNON GREEN: And what was that like for you, to move around a lot?

[00:13:51.13] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, it really didn't bother me, because it was happening to everybody else--or so I thought.

[00:14:01.28] SHANNON GREEN: You went to Lewiston [Idaho]?

[00:14:03.10] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Lewiston.

[00:14:03.18] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah. What was that like?

[00:14:05.19] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, that was--I remember saying, I left God at the California border, because I felt like--I was off to--well, we did have a little bit of snow, and I had never seen snow before. So, that was good. And then, I taught first and second grade, and that was kind of a challenge, because it's--the two grades. So, you gave time to one, and then you had to put them to work, and then you spent time with the other ones. And I taught--I think I had four years of that.

[00:14:53.27] SHANNON GREEN: And then you actually went back to St. Jarlath.

[00:14:55.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes. And that was a surprise, because in those days, they never sent us to our parish. So, that was really a big surprise to me. And I remember the Provincial saying to me, "You gotta be okay there", because she said that, "Everybody is reminding me that it's your home parish. So, behave yourself." [laughs]. So--but it--what they really assigned me to was the deaf work.

[00:15:33.09] SHANNON GREEN: So, tell me how you got into ministry with the deaf?

[00:15:37.11] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, I was just assigned, to be honest. I had no training, no help. In St. Jarvis parish, there was a deaf man--no, no--he was a hearing man of deaf parents. So, he offered to come and help me learn the sign language, because we did use the sign language. And I was never good at it. I wasn't quick enough to do it. I was a poor speller, to add to it, and so, I never really felt comfortable, the five years that I was in it.

[00:16:25.17] SHANNON GREEN: Were you aware, as this was starting for you, about the history of the Sisters, and then the--their work with the deaf communities?

[00:16:32.25] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh yeah, because, they--the deaf home was in Oakland.

[00:16:37.19] SHANNON GREEN: So, can you share with us any background or history that--around how the Sisters became involved with ministry for the deaf?

[00:16:46.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: You know, I--that I don't--well, of course that was the reason why we came to the United States. And then we came to California--Arizona and then California. So, the history of the deaf work in the province--you know, what I would suggest is that if you went to Oakland diocese, you could probably get information. Because I remembered the school. I remember it very well. And it closed during the Depression [(1929-1939)]. We--I guess we just couldn't make it work, you know? And so, what happened was San Francisco diocese at that time--archdiocese. And so, we happened--San Francisco archbishop said he would take over, which he did. And then closed it. And then sold the property.

So, there is a history there. But I think any Sister who would know it--I don't think is living right now. I do remember the Deaf School.

[00:18:24.19] SHANNON GREEN: Who were some of the other Sisters that you worked with that were--

[00:18:29.29] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Sister Thomas Mary Collins, and Sister--well, she was Rafael Marie, and then she went back to her own name--Sister Joan Gloistein [(1931-2013)]. And they were both very good--very excellent. I think they were even known on the national scene. They were both very good. And they would probably be able to fill you in a lot better than me. [laughs].

[00:19:03.13] SHANNON GREEN: So, tell me more about what this ministry was, exactly.

[00:19:08.02] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: That what? Well, what we did is, we taught Catechism--let's see--four days a week, and then we took them to Mass on Sunday. So, what happened is, I taught in the morning, and then--let's see--Monday afternoon I taught the deaf children in Oakland, Friday was in Burlingame, Thursday was in Berkeley, Tuesday was Father's--oh, Wednesday was San Francisco. Tuesday was Father's day off, so we didn't do anything. But what happened is, at lunch time, I taught in the morning, had lunch, then one of the priests that was involved in the deaf work picked the two of us up, and then drove us to the local Catholic school and dropped us off. And then they went to the public school where the deaf kids were, and they brought them to the Catholic school, because we couldn't teach religion. And so, we did that four days a week. And then took them to Mass on Sunday.

[00:20:40.12] SHANNON GREEN: Was there a particular parish that was--that had a Mass for--?

[00:20:46.07] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No. There was a Deaf Center. And so, what would happen is, we got some high school girls that had gone to St. Jarlath's, and were like at Holy Names, and they would drive us out to the Deaf School. We'd board the kids on busses, take them to the Deaf Center, where we had Mass. And then we put them back on the busses and brought them back to the Deaf School. And then this young woman that drove us, drove us back to St. Jarlath's. So, we would leave about, maybe three on Sunday morning and get back after twelve.

[00:21:44.19] SHANNON GREEN: This may sound like a strange question, but why was there a Deaf--was there a larger deaf community in the Bay Area, or was--why was there a need?

[00:21:56.19] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, the kids that were going to the public schools--it was there way of getting some kind of religion to them. That was--and then seeing the California School for the Deaf was located there in Berkeley. And so, on Thursdays we would go out to the Deaf School, and we could teach the kids there. But then every religion could come on that one day.

[00:22:33.24] SHANNON GREEN: So, there was a larger concentration--

[00:22:37.02] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes, yes.

[00:22:37.15] SHANNON GREEN: Oh, I see.

[00:22:39.12] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: And they lived there. They lived at the Deaf School. And that was very, very hard on those kids, you know? It just--I remember one fellow, one day, when I came in there was a new student. And what had happened was, he and his brother both got scarlatina? And they both recovered, and one was deaf and the other wasn't. And he was so deaf that he had to go to the Deaf School. And he was so resentful. Oh, you can just imagine. They had to bring somebody from the school to sit next to him to calm him down. It was--you know--and you would see that. The kids would just hang on to you.

[00:23:37.27] SHANNON GREEN: Yes, I was going to ask, did you get to know them in a way beyond--

[00:23:43.18] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No, not really. Not really. You know--it was--it made you appreciate having your hearing, believe me.

[00:23:59.21] SHANNON GREEN: When you look back, how do you feel about--what do you think about, when you look back on those years?

[00:24:05.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I knew I wasn't too successful. [laughs]. I would like to say. Well, I did some good, but I wasn't that good, you know? And--but there I was, so it's--you know. And I loved my fifth graders, and I'd have to leave them at noon and didn't see them again until the next day. And then they had to do busy work in the afternoon.

[00:24:43.26] SHANNON GREEN: So, you were torn--

[00:24:45.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: That's right. And one of those--and one of those classes, I still am in touch with some of the kids that were kids then. And then, my dad worked at the school, so the kids would--they would go walking by my dad and they would say, "Good morning, Mr. McFadden. Good morning, Mr. McFadden." [laughs]. Let me know that they knew my name. Because in those days, they never found out. So, they let me know that they knew my name.

[00:25:29.00] SHANNON GREEN: It's true. When I look back at older documents or things, the Sister's last name is never there.

[00:25:35.25] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. That's right.

[00:25:36.21] SHANNON GREEN: It's just the first name.

[00:25:37.23] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah.

[00:25:39.04] SHANNON GREEN: So, how did you end up leaving that ministry?

[00:25:46.24] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, I was assigned to St. Eugene's as Principal--Superior of the convent, and Principal of the school. And then that was--there are eight hundred kids in the school at the time.

[00:26:08.26] SHANNON GREEN: Can I ask, was there any sense of relief leaving the deaf ministry because you didn't--or how did it feel to leave that ministry?

[00:26:18.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I knew it was in good hands--in better hands than mine. [laughs].

[00:26:27.06] SHANNON GREEN: Do you ever--did you ever practice sign language beyond that time?

[00:26:31.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No. And I just was not good at it. I remember this one fellow--this fellow that--the hearing, and his parents were deaf, and he came once a week to help me. But you know, one evening he spelt "C-O-A-T" and here I am--C-O-A-T--what is--I couldn't even put it together with the word.

[00:27:01.08] SHANNON GREEN: So, you had some sense that--

[00:27:03.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. I knew I wasn't good at it, but you know, it's what I was assigned, so, I did it. [laughs]. And hopefully, I didn't do any bad things in any way. [laughs]. But I know the other two that I worked with, they were excellent. There is just no other word to describe them.

[00:27:36.16] SHANNON GREEN: Do you have any other--before we move on from that--do you have any other stories or memories about that time that you would like people to know about in terms of the Sisters' ministry to the deaf?

[00:27:45.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No, but you know, there are probably a lot of stories there, that if some of those older Sisters were there, would have been able to fill in. And it just seems that

that got lost. You know, with the Sisters--like for instance, the Sisters that were there when the archdiocese took over and then closed it--how they felt about it. And a little bit later on, when I was--oh, I was already assigned to high school--Father--they tried to do a school again in Oakland--in the Oakland diocese, and I remember Sister Thomas Mary [Collins] and Father O'Brien I think came to me, and they wanted me to become Principal of the school. And I said, you know, I really am happy in high school, and that's all I ever wanted to do is teach History in high school. And so I said, you know, I hope you can find somebody, but they didn't. And so, the efforts were really lost. Our Sisters didn't try to preserve it. But it was lost. You know, it just--yeah. I did spend a summer at Gallaudet College [now Gallaudet University, Washington, D. C., formerly Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind], and that's when I really realized most of the people at Gallaudet College during the summer, when I went, were teachers of deaf children. And some of them, themselves were deaf. So, then I think I realized what a ministry it was. You know, it's like some little niche in a corner--but there's more to it than that. I think our Sisters put a lot into--in trying to preserve our work in it, but it just--you know, in those days they just couldn't take a Sister and really train her. You know, it was after the war years, schools were--so, we ended up--but I do, the two that I worked with, I've got to say, they were excellent.

[00:30:57.18] SHANNON GREEN: So, my understanding of some of the history is, when some of the Sisters came from France, two of the Sisters were trained to work with the deaf.

[00:31:06.14] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: That's right.

[00:31:07.03] SHANNON GREEN: Do you know that? Can you just tell us that story, just so we capture it?

[00:31:10.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I guess the bishop or archbishop of St. Louis [Missouri] wanted some Sisters who could teach the deaf. And so, two of our Sisters were sent over to work with the deaf. And they opened that Deaf School in St. Louis [St. Joseph Institute for the Deaf], which is very famous today, you know. And so, when they came here, then I guess they thought well, that was our original work so we'll try to do it here. But unfortunately, it died along the way.

[00:31:56.21] SHANNON GREEN: You just said all you wanted to do is teach high school History.

[00:32:02.09] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Right.

[00:32:03.06] SHANNON GREEN: And your face kind of lights up. So, tell me about your love of teaching high school history.

[00:32:08.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, I loved it. I didn't have any problems. You know, they even--people say, "Oh, you teach high school, you teach boys"--but they weren't any problem. It was just that I really enjoyed going into the classroom each day. You know, it was just fun.

[00:32:37.00] SHANNON GREEN: Is there something about the subject of History in particular that captures you?

[00:32:42.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I taught U.S. History, which I enjoyed very much. And you know, it would be wonderful today with all of the technology that they--you know, we didn't have that then. You know, we could maybe get something at the local library. But we didn't have all the helps that they have today. All the little kids with their own little--and you know, it's so different. So different.

[00:33:25.11] SHANNON GREEN: Is there a favorite part of U.S. History for you, that you like to teach?

[00:33:32.07] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Of course, Civil War. Yeah. And the effects of the Civil War, which we still feel today, you know. It's just--it's hard to get kids to appreciate that. You know, they just--although they're certainly seeing it in today's society, you know. And without a background.

[00:34:06.23] SHANNON GREEN: Can you say more about that? Can you give an example of what you're seeing?

[00:34:12.29] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: The fact that racism is still alive. And I mean, we certainly are responsible for the treatment of the African-American after the Civil War was over. You know, it just--it's untold stories you know. And the thing--the sad part is, we didn't know any better. You know, we didn't know any better. And so therefore, the South was badly treated. And so, you have the reaction there. So--and the kids don't understand, you know. And so, we have what we have today, unfortunately.

[00:35:27.10] SHANNON GREEN: So, it sounds like you wanted--to use the teaching about the Civil War to help them understand--

[00:35:33.27] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. How it applied to when I was teaching them. And especially like in Oakland. You know. Oakland you know was very heavily African-American--very much so. Kaiser [American industrialist Henry John Kaiser (1882–1967)??] went down to the South during the War, and brought all those young African-Americans to work on his hospitals here. And so, therefore, none of them were going to go back down South. And you can't blame them. So, it was--you know, you can't go back and redo--what's done is done, you know.

[00:36:35.23] SHANNON GREEN: So, growing up in Oakland, did you know a lot of African-American families or friends o?

[00:36:40.23] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No. But you know, when I look at my kindergarten picture, you know, there were African-Americans. Probably Filipino or Spanish, in the picture. So, if you were to look at that picture, you wouldn't think--you know, that's--so that I actually grew up, you know--. But the kids today have a much better opportunity--if they take the time, you know. And it is hard, because you have parents that object to--and so, they have one thing in the home atmosphere and another thing in the school atmosphere. You know, I remember when I was teaching at St. Bernard's, and it was an election year, and so I put up two bulletin boards--one for the Democrats, and one for the Republicans. And I remember one girl stood up in class and said, "Where is the one for George Wallace?" And I said, "Well, if you want one, you do it." [laughs].

[00:38:28.15] SHANNON GREEN: How did you become aware of issues around racism, do you think?

[00:38:33.09] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I loved to read. And so, I probably picked it up in reading. You know, that's--and you know that right now that "Little Women"--I must have read that book ten times. And the other day, in the best seller's list, the--one of the best paperback sellers is "Little Women". I couldn't believe it. I thought, I remember seeing--I think it was Katherine Hepburn--but it was the like 1932 or 33, 34 in through there--I remember seeing that one. And I was--I wasn't that old at that time, you know. And I just loved it. And I read "Little Women", "Little Men", "Jo's Boys"--you know. When I read--here it's one of the best sellers. [laughs]. "Little Women".

[00:39:52.21] SHANNON GREEN: You're the second person to bring up that book today.

[00:39:55.25] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, no kidding.

[00:39:56.20] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah, Sister Joan [Sister Joan Marie Hagen] also brought it up--Hagen.

[00:39:59.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh.

[00:40:00.09] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah.

[00:40:01.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah.

[00:40:02.06] SHANNON GREEN: And I just saw the movie yesterday.

[00:40:03.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Did you like it?

[00:40:04.17] SHANNON GREEN: I did. I loved it. It's beautiful. Making a comeback.



[00:40:09.14] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: It's said, it's a new slant. That's what I read. I read all the articles on--and I thought, well, I hope the kids--the young women today, you know, or--and teenage girls, yeah. It's just--yeah. Oh, how well I can remember--I was just little, I remember. And I remember falling in love with Jo, like everybody else did. [laughs]. You like the new version though, huh?

[00:40:58.19] SHANNON GREEN: I did--I haven't read the book in many years, but I did like the film very much, yeah.

[00:41:02.19] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, good.

[00:41:04.01] SHANNON GREEN: Let's just--it's a really beautiful film too. It's beautifully shot.

[00:41:07.11] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, yeah. Well, I noticed it's on the best sellers for people to see it.

[00:41:16.27] SHANNON GREEN: You know, also, it sounds like when you went to--looking at your ministry--St. Eugene's and St. Bernard's--was the time of the Second Vatican Council [Vatican II (1962-1965)]. So, would you--I ask all the Sisters--would you share a little bit about your experience of what it was like as a Sister to go through the Vatican II, and how that changed things.

[00:41:43.04] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, you know, I think I just went along with what the community did to change, and it was fine with me. Although I do remember the first thing was, we had to give up our side beads. I remember that. And thinking, uhoh--I still have my side beads. And that was the beginning.

[00:42:18.20] SHANNON GREEN: Was that difficult--when you say "uhoh"?

[00:42:21.12] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. I didn't--I enjoyed the side beads. I was always getting them caught and broken and everything, but that was okay. But it was--to me, it was kind of letting things know that there's going to be change. Yeah. Far greater change than I realized. [laughs]. You know, going back--I never went back to my original name though. I kept--I liked it because it was my father's and my mother's name. And there was no boy in the family. So, I liked the idea of being the "Dennis" of that generation, and of course there's quite a few Dennis-es since. [laughs]. Yeah.

[00:43:23.02] SHANNON GREEN: Did it--did the changes--was there anything about any of the changes that was particularly interested or exciting to you as it unfolded?

[00:43:30.27] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No, I think I just went along with whatever was happening. You know, I don't remember fighting anything.

[00:43:48.29] SHANNON GREEN: Did you have the workshops and everything to learn about it?

[00:43:53.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah.

[00:43:54.04] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah.

[00:43:58.22] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Probably, I remember one priest saying to the priests, "How many of you prepared your congregation for the changes among the Sisters?" You know, instead of condemning the Sisters for coming out, going back to their original name, wearing secular clothes--and instead of--appreciate what they were trying to do. Instead, many of the pastors, especially some of the older ones, were really hyper-critical.

[00:44:46.24] SHANNON GREEN: Did you feel that as a Sister?

[00:44:53.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: One parish, yeah. But then, we weren't really parishioners, so we didn't have to worry about it. [laughs].

[00:45:10.00] SHANNON GREEN: So, you've stayed in education?

[00:45:17.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes, I did.

[00:45:18.29] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah.

[00:45:20.16] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. I liked it--I'm glad I didn't have to leave.

[00:45:25.05] SHANNON GREEN: So many Sisters changed their ministries--

[00:45:29.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, yes, yes. And you know, some of them, you know, when they entered, there was no other choice. You know, even some of them that entered a nursing community, which we were, entered our community thinking they could become nurses, but then the War and the building up of these parishes--when you think in terms of California--all the way down the coast. And we filled in many of those spots. So that there wasn't room to do anything else but teach. [laughs]. And I always figured I was lucky that I did enjoy teaching.

[00:46:28.21] SHANNON GREEN: Then you were at St. Mary's Academy [Los Angeles, California] for some time as well.

[00:46:32.27] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yes. I was there at--as Principal for eight years. And then when my principalship was up--we were limited at that time. And I stayed on for another five years and started the Office of Development--which has now grown to a pretty big office. [laughs].

[00:46:57.22] SHANNON GREEN: You were the first.

[00:47:00.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I was the first to start it, yeah.

[00:47:02.06] SHANNON GREEN: What can you tell us about your time at St. Mary's Academy, since it's still a sponsored ministry of the--

[00:47:07.19] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, yes. It was--you know, it just--it was one of the places that we held in reverence, you know. It just--by the time I got there, it was--I would say, eighty percent African-American. I remember when I addressed the first freshman class, and there was one white girl. That was it. The rest were African-Americans. And now it's swinging again. It's interesting. And I think it will swing even more with the new stadium. I think Inglewood will--which I think is great.

[00:48:21.29] SHANNON GREEN: It seems--St. Mary's Academy--that seems to be reflection of not just the neighborhood, but what's happening in the world.

[00:48:32.10] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: That's right. You know, it just--and then you know, then a problem developed between the alums and the school change. But I think that's been kind of taken care of over the period of time, you know. And then, see, another thing--it was not the same campus either, which made it more difficult. But I loved the time that I was there.

[00:49:09.24] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah, it's a special place.

[00:49:11.14] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah, it was.

[00:49:13.01] SHANNON GREEN: Look at my list of questions here.

[00:49:18.13] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I'm sorry I can't be more help with the deaf.

[00:49:22.11] SHANNON GREEN: That's okay. We just wanted to have someone who had that experience. So that's very helpful. So, we ask all the Sisters--what are you--do you have hopes or anxieties around kind of the future or the current state of religious life, the future of religious life, the charism?

[00:49:45.13] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, I think we'll have it. Maybe a different way of looking at things. But I think--I do think it will exist. I don't think it will die out.

[00:50:00.18] SHANNON GREEN: Where do you see it in new ways these days?

[00:50:04.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Maybe admitting couples. You know, that could be a way. Or making it--the idea that they would enter for a certain period of time and then not take vows for the rest of their lives. Because I think maybe that idea made some people before it became okay to leave--but then, given way back, I think some people might have--were not that happy but would not think of leaving. Whereas, you know with that--with the exodus that took place, freed many people.

[00:51:21.19] SHANNON GREEN: What is--what part of the charism or the history of the Sisters really draws you? Is a source of inspiration for you?

[00:51:39.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I think the lives of the Sisters that I saw. You know, they seem like happy women and they seemed to love doing their job in--. One of the things that I remember, my younger sister came down with scarlet fever. And so, we were isolated for twenty-one days. And my dad could go to work, and that was it. He would stop by the library and the librarian would give him books for my older sister and I to read. But I remember on--we were released on Holy Saturday. And we were running around the neighborhood--you know, we were free. But I remember so well is, a car drove up in front of our house, and out stepped two of the Sisters. And they have a large Easter basket for us. And I thought, wow, if the Sisters thought that much of us--and that really made an impression on me. You know, they couldn't come and see us, but they didn't realize that we were freed. But the idea that they thought of us, you know, being locked up for twenty-one days. [laughs].

[00:53:41.20] SHANNON GREEN: That's a beautiful--I can just imagine it as you were saying it. That's really lovely.

[00:53:49.03] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah.

[00:53:50.25] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah. So, it's the women you've known--

[00:53:53.15] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: That's right. Yeah.

[00:53:58.14] SHANNON GREEN: Are there other Sisters who's names you just--that you remember that you would want us to know were important to you?

[00:54:08.04] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: You know, I can remember the names of all the teachers that I had. You know, they were--third grade was Sister Roberta [??], fourth grade was Sister Raymond [??], fifth grade Sister--I could go right through them--remember every single one of them. So, all in all I had a very happy childhood.

[00:54:43.27] SHANNON GREEN: What would you say you are most proud of in your community--Sisters that you--someone's--an achievement or legacy?

[00:54:58.03] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I think that we've tried to be--that idea that everyone is our neighbor. You know, that it's--"no distinction". That where help was needed help was given, without distinction. And I certainly saw that.

[00:55:39.22] SHANNON GREEN: Was there anything else that you thought about in terms of the questions that I sent you or the ministries that you've thought about that you wanted to share that I haven't asked you about?

[00:55:48.17] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: You know, what happened is, my computer acted up, and I lost--.

[00:55:54.29] SHANNON GREEN: It happens.

[00:55:56.18] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: And I thought, well, what I have to say is not--[laughs]. No, but I'm glad that the community wanted to pursue the deaf part, because I think that would have been lost. And would really encourage someone to go to the diocese of Oakland and San Francisco and see if they can get the background--particularly for the school that we had in Oakland. Because I'm sure--I don't know--as I said, when I was at St. Jarlath's, there was the trunk, and they had all the information, but I don't know what happened to it.

[00:56:52.26] SHANNON GREEN: Well, we often pull together different options for research, you know, to give our faculty and so forth. So, we can add that to our list of research questions. Do you mind if I ask you some just kind of general questions?

[00:57:08.15] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah, that's fine.

[00:57:10.09] SHANNON GREEN: What do you like to do for fun?

[00:57:11.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, let's see. My--one of the things I do, I really enjoy reading. That's--but I'm fussy about what I read, you know. I just don't read like these--you know, these ones that you can pick up and read in a night.

[00:57:53.02] SHANNON GREEN: What's something you've read lately that you've enjoyed, or?

[00:57:55.23] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I like David Baldacci [American fiction author]. I think he writes well. And I think that makes a big difference.

[00:58:10.11] SHANNON GREEN: Fiction? Non-fiction? That's fiction, yes, but do you like any non-fiction?

[00:58:14.19] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I'm trying to think of what's the last non-fiction I read. Well, of course, the books--two books. And I like to play poker with my friends.

[00:58:41.15] SHANNON GREEN: Really?

[00:58:44.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah.

[00:58:44.24] SHANNON GREEN: Tell me more about that.

[00:58:46.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, this one friend of mine, she has a couple of sisters. And when we get together, we play poker. We don't play for a whole lot of money, needless to say. But it's the fun of it. You know, we play like "Between the Sheets" and--the different games, yeah. So, it's fun, you know. I'm trying to think of what else.

[00:59:23.08] SHANNON GREEN: Did you have other hobbies at other times?

[00:59:26.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No. Growing up, I was a stamp collector.

[00:59:36.11] SHANNON GREEN: Okay. Let me ask you a couple more. What is the greatest technological advance you've witnessed in your lifetime?

[00:59:42.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Probably the age of computers--the way they put them into classrooms. And you know, how it's really enriched the minds of the kids. You know, they no longer have to sit down and memorize, which is--. And when you see little kids--it's amazing. Or talking into a--you know, you say, oh who won the World Series in '29? [Holds hand up to mouth.] "Who won the World Series in '29." And they get immediately--no having to go to some book and look it up. You know, it's amazing.

[01:00:54.04] SHANNON GREEN: What about a human advancement, or human progress that you've witnessed in your lifetime. What's the greatest?

[01:01:00.11] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, you know, I had two classmates that were both caught in that 1934--well, we called it "infantile paralysis" [poliomyelitis] then. They were both--one was in a wheelchair and the other was on crutches. And to see how much progress we've made--it's just amazing. You know, it's--and like in the field of cancer--that of itself you know. And the fact that the U.S. is willing to put in research--that's, you know--. And taking on attempts, you know, to like see--help little kids that are autistic--to really see the development in that way.

[01:02:35.20] SHANNON GREEN: Is there a person living on Earth that you wish you could meet--a particular person that you would like to meet?

[01:02:42.20] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, living or dead?

[01:02:50.17] SHANNON GREEN: Either.

[01:02:51.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: One of the persons I would really like to meet is Father William Doyle, SJ [Father William Joseph Gabriel "Willie" Doyle, S.J., MC (1873–1917), Irish priest killed in action during World War I]. He was a Jesuit priest, an Irishman, and he volunteered for First World War. And he was killed in action. And everybody felt that he deserved--of course, Ireland was under England at that time--and so, he didn't--every--his troops said he dealt with--all recommended him for the Victoria Cross, and of course, he didn't get it because he was an Irishman and a priest. But his life story is just amazing. The letters that he wrote home, in which he described the conditions of 1917, which is the film that's come out now--the war that should have never been fought. And he was just like a saint. And of course, he was killed in action. But I would love to meet him. I'm going to look him up when I get back up in--.

[01:04:37.21] SHANNON GREEN: What is your favorite place on Earth?

[01:04:42.04] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Probably where I am.

[01:04:52.18] SHANNON GREEN: Wherever you are? Or?

[01:04:58.18] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. I've been happy wherever I've been. And I remember when I entered, I said, "Well, I'm going to have to miss two things: I'm going to have to miss ever seeing a Notre Dame game, and the second thing is I'll never get to Ireland." Well, I've been to Ireland twice. And I've been to a Notre Dame game I think three times. So, I thought, well that will never happen, but it did.

[01:05:36.12] SHANNON GREEN: Where in Ireland. What was the favorite of--

[01:05:39.05] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Donegal. My parents are from Donegal. They didn't know each other in Ireland. They met in San Francisco. But they're both from Donegal.

[01:05:53.28] SHANNON GREEN: Are you a sports fan?

[01:05:56.00] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, yes.

[01:05:57.06] SHANNON GREEN: Oh. Tell me a little about that.

[01:05:58.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, I love Notre Dame football. And I like the Angels [Los Angeles baseball team]. I follow the Angels. And football I like the Steelers [Pittsburgh Pennsylvania football team]. I'm not too much on the L.A. teams.

[01:06:27.09] SHANNON GREEN: Well, you're a good Northern Californian, so--.

[01:06:29.13] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Oh, 49ers [San Francisco football team]. You know--go all the way--they'd better. [laughs].

[01:06:39.18] SHANNON GREEN: What about--you mentioned a couple of issues. But is there a social justice

issue today that really captures your heart?

[01:06:49.23] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, one of the things is that idea of the children being separated from their parents. You know, you just--you can't fathom it. You know. I can remember being separated from my parents for a night and I was crying my eyes out. And imagine these kids--it's just--yeah. Well, I did watch two hours this morning of the opening of the impeachment thing [impeachment trial of President Donald Trump]. It's going to be interesting--very interesting.

[01:07:50.17] SHANNON GREEN: Anything more you want to say about that?

[01:07:55.12] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, I think we've become a disgrace to the world. I mean, when you think of how we--how the other nations of the world would look to us, and now we're down in a heap. It--I can't understand how he has followers. That's what makes it scary. I know a lot of it is the fact that not everyone has the same amount of education--I realize that. And I know it's a factor. But still, it just--. And even--they were--not a whole lot--but a couple of times they broke in and quoted him, like I can do anything I want regarding the Second Amendment. Those are the things that are scary. You know, making promises that cannot be fulfilled. And what is it saying to our kids when they can prove lies. But--

[01:09:44.06] [Director's comments].

[01:10:00.29] SHANNON GREEN: When you think about the times that we're in, what do you think about the charism and what it can do for the world?

[01:10:09.28] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, that idea of treating people with dignity wherever they are--I think that's important. And you know, coming here today, before we got onto the freeway, a whole--probably two blocks nothing but tents. And you know--how do we take care of it? Now, I know, unfortunately, we have an overgrowth as far as population--I realize that. People come here because they don't have to face the snow and all that, so they can come here. And--but--how do we take care of it? It's just--we just do what we can. That's about it.

[01:12:03.27] SHANNON GREEN: I feel like I want to end on a more hopeful note. I had you excited about football and then talking about impeachment. [laughs].

[01:12:17.09] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Well, baseball season is starting. And after the black eye--stealing signs [Houston Astros sign-stealing scandal 2020]. I mean, what does this say to the kids?

[01:12:37.27] SHANNON GREEN: Do you have any advice for the kids?

[01:12:43.17] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: [laughs]. Lead decent lives. Do what you know is right, regardless of what everybody else is doing. And that winning by cheating is not winning.

[01:13:12.27] SHANNON GREEN: That is true.

[01:13:14.27] [Director's comments].

[01:13:26.18] SHANNON GREEN: Is there anything else you wanted to share?

[01:13:28.18] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Pardon me?

[01:13:29.13] SHANNON GREEN: Anything else you wanted to share with us?

[01:13:31.26] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: No, not that I can think of.

[01:13:34.21] SHANNON GREEN: Thank you so much. This is really delightful. Thank you, that was really fantastic. Thank you.

[01:13:42.15] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I would just really encourage you to see what the

Oakland diocese has.

[01:13:47.23] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah, that's a very good idea.

[01:13:49.08] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: I--and remember, it's San Francisco--it was originally San Francisco. When they took over the Deaf School, it was still the archdiocese of San Francisco.

[01:14:01.05] SHANNON GREEN: Yeah, I wonder how they have their archives organized, you know. That would be interesting to find out before--.

[01:14:05.12] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah. Because I was in Oakland at the time it was--the split occurred.

[01:14:09.23] SHANNON GREEN: Oh, okay. That makes sense.

[01:14:12.16] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: And see, and then that's what happened--that's how I ended up working with Sister Joan Gloistein, because Thomas Mary was assigned to go with San Francisco. And that left me--but those were the old days where you had to have a companion. So, they--when I would go out in the afternoon, Joan Gloistein would go with me.

[01:14:37.17] SHANNON GREEN: Can't go by yourself.

[01:14:38.21] SISTER DENNIS MARY MCFADDEN: Yeah--no, couldn't go by myself. I couldn't be traded. [all laugh].

[01:14:43.19] [Director's comments].

[01:14:49.09] End of interview.

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Project: Mount Saint Mary's University--CSJ Oral History Project

Interview Date: 01/21/2020

Interviewee: Sister Dennis Mary McFadden

Interviewer: Shannon Green, Director, CSJ Institute, Mount Saint Mary's University; Roman Zenz, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University; Mary Trunk, Instructor, Film and Television, Mount Saint Mary's University

Location: Carondelet Center, Los Angeles, California.

Transcription Date: 02/14/2020

Transcribed By: Nancy Steinmann

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[00:01:30.06] Early religious life. Parents' work.

[00:03:35.25] Attraction to CSJs. Early vocation.

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[01:14:49.09] End of interview.